

VZCZCXRO6040
OO RUEHCN RUEHGH RUEHHM RUEHVK
DE RUEHUL #4281/01 3490905
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
O 150905Z DEC 06
FM AMEMBASSY SEOUL
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 1931
INFO RUEHMO/AMEMBASSY MOSCOW 7720
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 1842
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 1743
RUEHBK/AMEMBASSY BANGKOK 6412
RUEHUM/AMEMBASSY ULAANBAATAR 1422
RUEHHI/AMEMBASSY HANOI 2025
RUEHPF/AMEMBASSY PHNOM PENH 0270
RUEHGO/AMEMBASSY RANGOON 2417
RUEHML/AMEMBASSY MANILA 8655
RUEHCN/AMCONSUL CHENGDU 0074
RUDKIA/AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI 0903
RUEHGZ/AMCONSUL GUANGZHOU 1252
RUEHHM/AMCONSUL HO CHI MINH CITY 0017
RUEHHK/AMCONSUL HONG KONG 3044
RUEHGH/AMCONSUL SHANGHAI 0059
RUEHSH/AMCONSUL SHENYANG 3235
RUEHVK/AMCONSUL VLADIVOSTOK 1167
RHMFISS/COMUSKOREA J5 SEOUL KOR
RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI
RHMFISS/COMUSKOREA J2 SEOUL KOR
RHMFISS/COMUSKOREA SCJS SEOUL KOR

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 SEOUL 004281

SIPDIS

SIPDIS
SENSITIVE

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PREF](#) [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KTIP](#) [KS](#) [KN](#)

SUBJECT: NORTH KOREAN REFUGEES IN THE ROK: AN OVERVIEW

REF: A. SEOUL 1837
[1](#)B. 05 SEOUL 666
[1](#)C. SEOUL 4131
[1](#)D. 05 SEOUL 77

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (SBU) The ROKG's resettlement programs for North Korean refugees have evolved over time as the number of refugees has grown and their demographics have changed. South Korean officials and experts see the ROK's efforts to help the nearly 10,000 refugees successfully resettle in the ROK as the first step toward, and a preview of, reunification. The ROK's programs include financial, educational, and employment assistance, involving numerous government agencies and civil society groups. END SUMMARY.

[1](#)2. (SBU) This is the first in a series of cables outlining resettlement programs and conditions for North Korean refugees in the ROK. Information and comments were provided through meetings in November and December 2006 with ROKG officials, academic experts, NGO leaders, and several resettled North Koreans. Our interlocutors were from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MOFAT), Ministry of Unification (MOU), and Ministry of Labor (MOL), the Hanawon resettlement facility, local community offices, and NGOs.

HISTORY OF RESETTLEMENT PROGRAM

[1](#)3. (SBU) The ROK is approaching a landmark of 10,000 resettled North Koreans, the vast majority of whom have arrived since the late 1990s. The ROKG calls them "Saetomin," or new settlers; to most Koreans they are known as "Thalbukja," or "people who have escaped the North." Lee Kang-rak, former Hanawon Director and current Secretary-General of the Association of Supporters for

SIPDIS

Defecting North Korean Residents, reported that prior to the mid-1990s, most North Korean refugees who came to the ROK were political defectors of a relatively high level, whom the ROK saw primarily as intelligence assets and public diplomacy tools in its competition with the North. Government assistance to North Korean refugees was first directed under the 1962 Special Relief Act for Patriots, Veterans, and North Korean Refugees, which provided large amounts of cash assistance to North Koreans.

14. (SBU) During the 1990s, as the number of North Korean refugees arriving in the ROK increased, and more of them came from marginalized classes, the ROK's programs shifted to providing rehabilitation as well, with the goal of helping them adjust to life in South Korean society. In 1997, the ROK passed the "Protection of Defecting North Korean Residents and Settlement Support Act" (1997 Protection Act), which outlined the Government's policies and programs for North Koreans resettled in the ROK. Through this law, the ROK extends protection to North Koreans seeking protection in third countries, establishes the criteria for protection to be granted, and sets the rights and obligations of refugees. The 1997 Protection Act authorizes the establishment of resettlement facilities, training programs, and housing assistance programs, and outlines North Koreans' access to longer-term assistance programs.

15. (SBU) Bureaucratically, the 1997 Protection Act empowers the Ministry of Unification (MOU) to grant protection to North Koreans, although the National Intelligence Service (NIS) also has a role if "national security" is involved. Under this Act, the ROK grants protection to all North

SEOUL 00004281 002 OF 003

Koreans, unless they have: committed international criminal offenses involving aircraft hijacking, drug trafficking, terrorism or genocide; committed serious nonpolitical crimes, such as murder; are suspected of disguised defection (i.e., spies); or have earned a living in another country of domicile for a considerable time period or acquired another foreign nationality after defecting from North Korea. NK Database Center President Yoon Yeo-sang and several legal experts explained that the 1997 Act does not give the ROKG the ability to decide which North Koreans can or cannot enter the ROK, but empowers the Government to decide who receives protected status, including facilitating their transit from third countries or extending financial assistance to them.

HANAWON

16. (SBU) After their arrival, North Koreans are considered ROK citizens, entitled to the same public assistance benefits as all other South Koreans. In addition, to help North Koreans adjust to life in the South, the ROK has developed an assistance program specifically to ease resettlement. Key to the ROK's program is the Hanawon resettlement facility, which nearly all North Koreans attend for 10 weeks following completion of a preliminary screening process. Hanawon's programs provide North Koreans with a basic understanding of South Korean society, democratic and free market principles and human rights, as well as educational and vocational training (Refs A and B).

FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE

17. (SBU) The ROKG has periodically adjusted its assistance package as the number of North Koreans entering the ROK increased and as experts learned more about their effectiveness. At present, the ROKG provides all North Korean refugees with a basic payment of KRW 10 million (about USD 10,000), with KRW 3 million (USD 3,000) paid upon graduation from Hanawon and the remaining KRW 7 million (USD

7,000) paid in three-month installments over two years. The ROKG provides additional incentive payments up to KRW 15.4 million (USD 15,400) for North Koreans who complete training programs or obtain long-term stable employment. Senior citizens and persons with disabilities or long-term illness are provided with up to KRW 15.4 million (USD 15,400) in additional funds. The ROKG provides North Korean resettlers with public housing or with KRW 10 million (USD 10,000) for leasing their own apartment. In addition to this assistance, North Korean refugees also have access to the ROK's Basic Livelihood Security (or welfare) program, unemployment assistance, old-age pension, and medical insurance and benefits. According to MOU statistics, 72 percent of North Koreans receive Basic Livelihood Security Assistance and 80 percent receive health insurance benefits.

VOCATIONAL SUPPORT

¶8. (SBU) The Ministry of Labor (MOL) assigns each North Korean an employment protection officer, who helps them find employment and obtain additional vocational training. The MOL recruits companies to hire North Korean resettlers, and subsidizes 50 percent of their wages for two years. North Koreans under 25 are exempt from paying middle and high school tuition fees, and those under 35 are provided with free university tuition. The ROKG has established special schools for North Koreans to help them overcome educational gaps and better integrate into the public education system (Ref C). The ROK has also established quotas for North

SEOUL 00004281 003 OF 003

Korean refugees at universities to ease the admission process.

IN-KIND VS. CASH ASSISTANCE

¶9. (SBU) The above package of assistance has been in place since 2005, when the ROKG reduced the amount of up-front assistance to address the prevailing complaint that many North Koreans paid most or all of their resettlement assistance to brokers who assisted in their journey to the South (Ref D). Some experts ascribe different motives. Kookmin University scholar Andrei Lankov argued that the change was a way for the ROK to reduce the number of North Koreans coming to the ROK by discouraging "chain defection," in which North Koreans paid brokers to bring family members to the ROK. Han Ki-hong, President of NK Net, agreed with the ROKG's goal of helping North Koreans become more self-sufficient through incentive packages, but also thought the reduction of up-front assistance was motivated in part to keep refugees from giving money to brokers to bring their family members to the ROK.

¶10. (SBU) Some practitioners who work directly with North Korean refugees in the resettlement process believe that the financial assistance provided should be further restructured, however, with an even greater focus on self-sufficiency. The director of one of the largest private resettlement centers for North Koreans argued that the ROK should provide financial assistance for a shorter time period so refugees are encouraged to obtain employment more quickly.

HUMANITARIAN VS. POLITICAL GOALS

¶11. (SBU) The ROKG continues to balance the humanitarian and political aspects of its programs for North Korean refugees. While the goal of the ROK's resettlement program is helping North Koreans adjust to life in the ROK, Lee Kang-rak said that helping this population succeed is an important preparation for unification, allowing the ROK to determine how best to integrate North Koreans. Asia Foundation Program Director Moon Chun-sang argued that the ROK should think beyond its current welfare-focused approach to resettlement

and move toward a unification approach that would help prepare North Koreans for a meaningful role in a unified Korea, particularly by providing advanced educational opportunities to refugees.

VERSHBOW